DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 671 CG 011 491

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TITLE A Cross-Cultural Study of Empathy in Young Children.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Western Psychological Association (Los Angeles, California, April 8-11, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; *Childhood Attitudes; *Child Rearing; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Traits; *Discipline; *Empathy; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Influence; Research Projects
IDENTIFIERS *Greece

ABSTRACT

To gauge the effect that different cultural attitudes and child-rearing practices may have on the development of empathy, the Feshbach and Roe Affective Situational Test for Empathy was administered to 64 Greek city children and to 60 Greek rural children, all aged six to seven. The empathic responses of the Greek children were compared to those obtained earlier from 46 American city children. Greek children were less empathic than American children and whereas there was no overall difference in the responses of American boys versus American girls, Greek boys were less empathic than Greek girls. These results are attributed to the inhibition of the internalization process in Greece, where parents discipline their children by rigid and punitive means. The close mother-son relationship, heightened by the fact that Greek fathers seldom participate in child-rearing and are usually away from home, may further inhibit the internalization process and empathy in Greek boys. (Author)

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ED141671

A Cross-Cultural Study of Empathy in Young Children

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A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF EMPATHY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Kiki V. Roe

Social theorists have always considered empathy as an important dimension of personality and a critical element in social understanding and interpersonal transactions. However, most of the older literature is speculative in nature regarding this personality construct (Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1953), and only recently has there been an effort to empirically gauge its nature (Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Stotland, Sherman, & Shaver, 1971; Borke, 1973; Chandler, 1973). Little is known about the specific variables that influence the development of empathy, though Hoffman (1967), Aronfreed (1968) and Feshbach (1975) have speculated that socialization processes and child-rearing attitudes and practices are important determinants of empathic behavior. This hypothesis could be tested by finding children in this country who have been subjected to radically different child-rearing practices. However, parental socialization procedures in the United States have become increasingly homogeneous, and it was felt than an intercultural study comparing empathy in children from two radically different child-rearing environmnets, such as Greece and the United States, would better highlight the possible effects of this variable.

Empathy is viewed as a vicarious affective identification between the observer and the observed. It is presumed that for empathy to occur the subject has to have sufficient cognitive capability and sufficient social understanding to correctly identify

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and label the affective state of others, and, furthermore, be emotionally capable of vicariously experiencing the affective state of others. On the basis of this conceptualization, Feshbach and Roe (1968) developed the Affective Situation Test for Empathy, which consists of two sequences of three slides each, along with descriptive verbal texts, depicting children experiencing four affective situations, namely: happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. Immediately after presentation of each of the eight slide sequences, the subject indicates his or her feelings and is given a positive empathy score if the general affective content of the answer matches the affective content of the slide sequence. Using this test, Feshbach and Roe found that, for a group of middle-class Los Angeles children, the overall empathy responses of boys were about the same as those of girls, and that both boys and girls gave much greater empathic responses when viewing slide sequences in which the stimulus children were of the same sex as the subject child. From this it was concluded that similarity heightens the empathic response.

Data from the Feshbach and Roe study are used here for comparison with the empathy responses recently obtained from two groups of Greek children coming from two different geographical, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds.

METHOD

Subjects

The Greek city subjects were normal six and seven year old

children of both sexes (32 boys and 32 girls) randomly selected from the first and second grades of a public elementary school in Athens. The children came from middle-class background and were of at least average intelligence. This group was selected because it closely approximated, in socioeconomic background, the previously tested 46 American city subjects.

The Greek rural subjects were 60 normal six and seven year old children (30 boys and 30 girls) randomly selected from the first and second grades of a public elementary school on a remote Aegean Island. The social, economic, and educational level of these subjects' parents was considerably lower than that of the Athenian subjects.

Material

The same slide sequences depicting seven-year-olds in one of four different affective situations (happiness, sadness, fear, and anger), used by Feshbach and Roe (1968) with the American subjects, were used with the Greek subjects. There are two sequences of three slides each for each of the four affects. Two alternate sets of the eight sequences were prepared, identical in content but different in the sex of the stimulus subject. A few minor modifications were made in the narration accompanying the slides shown to the Greek children, to remove possible cultural bias. For example, a reference to Disneyland was deleted. The slides with the Greek narration were presented to a pilot group of seven Athenian and five island children who were asked to guess the names of the children

in the stories and where the children lived. All 12 subjects assigned Greek names to the stimulus children shown on the slides and said the stimulus children came from "around Athens." This suggests that the Greek subjects were not aware of the American origin of the slides.

A check on the subjects' ability to comprehend the affective situation depicted by the slide stories was made with 27 of the 46 American subjects and 104 of the 124 Greek subjects after these subjects had completed their first viewing and made their own empathic responses. In the second viewing, the subjects were asked to describe how the stimulus children in the slide stories felt. All of the American and Greek subjects correctly identified the positive or negative emotional situation being experienced by the stimulus children in each of the slides.

Procedure

Each subject was individually called from the classroom to an interview room in the school and tested by the same female experimenter. Half of the subjects were shown the set of slide sequences in which the stimulus child was of the same sex as the subject, and half were shown slides depicting stimulus children of the opposite sex. In order to heighten the impact of the affective content, the two slide sequences on the same affect were presented consecutively. A short task (classifying paper discs by color) was interposed between sequences on different affects. Immediately after the presentation of each of the eight slide

sequences, the subjects were asked to state how they felt, and their responses were recorded verbatim. Subsequently, responses were scored such that a point was given for each answer in which the general affective content matched that of the depicted story in terms of its negative or positive connotation. Thus, a subject's total empathy score for all affects would fall within the range of 0 to 8.

RESULTS

The mean scores and the analysis of variance results are shown in Table 1. Individual comparisons for those effects in the analysis of variance which are significant (location, subject sex, and subject sex x stimulus sex) indicate that the overall mean empathy response for the Greek city children does not differ significantly from that of the Greek island children, but that the combined Greek sample was significantly less empathic than the American sample, t (158) = 5.52, $p < .00000007$. The significant difference in the overall analysis of variance between the subject sexes is entirely attributable to the marked difference between male and female responses of the Greek children, t (158) = 3.52, $p < .0003$, whereas both sexes in the American sample had almost identical mean empathic scores.

One of the hypotheses, based on early experience with American children only, was that similarity between the subject and the stimulus sex enhances empathy (for the American subjects, t (158) = 1.90, $p < .03$). For the Athenian children, empathy

was enhanced by similarity of subject and stimulus sex, t (158) = 1.66, $p < .05$, but for the Greek island children, this was not true. Here, we find that the Greek island boys responded less empathically to male stimuli children than to female stimuli children, t (158) = 1.69, $p < .05$, and on the whole, the Greek island children's responses to female stimuli children was significantly more empathic than their responses to male stimuli children, t (158) = 2.39, $p < .01$.

Insert Table 1 about here

DISCUSSION

The cross-cultural evaluation does reveal significant differences between the empathic behavior of children in the two countries, but the direction of the results, which indicate that Greek children are less empathic than American children, can be a surprise to those who picture the Greek as someone who is emotionally expressive, generous, and extroverted. Should not the "positive" quality of empathy co-exist with the other "positive" attributes of the Greek stereotype? The answer to this question may help clarify both the nature of empathy and the nature of the Greek character.

Vassiliou's (1969) extensive studies on the transactions of the Greek family indicate that one of the salient features of the Greek culture is the dependency that parents try to foster in their children. The mother is the principal person who raises

the children in Greece, in that the father, if not at work, is usually away from home at the café or the tavern with his friends, thus providing very little contact with his children. Of particular interest is the close mother-son relationship, a social role which has acquired a revered status in Greece. Male children are highly valued in Greece and are seen as the embodiment of the entire family's future. The Greek mother, therefore, overprotects and overindulges her son and tries to keep him emotionally tied to her, thus inhibiting the development of his own independent identity and personality. To foster such dependency and subordination, the Greek parents are punitive and restrictive whenever the child dares to express any desire to become independent, or expresses any negative feelings towards the parents. In general, the Greek parent's major modes of disciplining the children are frequent physical punishment, threats of punishment, and shaming, with almost complete absence of recourse to reasoning and induction. As a result of such rigid and punitive upbringing, the relationship of the children towards the parents, and especially of the sons towards the fathers, is characterized by negative feelings (Vassiliou, 1969), and there is evidence that this kind of child-rearing practices inhibit the internalization of controls and therefore the development of moral conduct, of which empathy is considered an integral part.

Thus, Hoffman (1967), in his report on the effect of socialization practices on the development of moral behavior,

states that when a parent asserts his power over a child by the use of physical punishment as the primary method of control, the development of moral standards and internalization of controls by the child is impeded because power assertion provokes intense hostility in the child and also provides the child with the model for outwardly expressing this hostility. Hoffman further states that such power assertion " ... makes the child's need for love less salient, and functions as an obstacle to the arousal of empathy. Finally, it sensitizes the child to the punitive responses of adult authorities, thus contributing to an externally focused moral orientation". From the foregoing, it appears that our previous definition of empathy as an affective identification between the observer and the observed implies the process of internalization and introjection of the feelings of others. Thus, one should find empathy associated with the degree that a person has internalized his experiences and developed inner controls to guide his behavior. On the other hand, low empathy should be associated with a process of externalization and a tendency to project feelings to the outside world, as well as a tendency to rely on external authority rather than internal controls to avoid transgressions.

The internalization-externalization conception of empathy may explain the frequently cited finding (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1971; Chandler, 1973) of the negative correlation between

empathy and aggression or antisocial behavior. The explanation proposed here is that aggression, which is usually defined as acting-out impulsive behavior, is the result of the lack of internal-inhibitory mechanisms which work as controls of aggressive and antisocial behavior. Therefore, it is not that the presence of empathy inhibits aggression, but, rather, both aggression and empathy stem from the degree of internalization of experiences and moral judgments.

There was ample evidence of externalization in the verbatim transcripts of the Greek children, with frequent critical and judgmental remarks about the behavior of the stimulus children. The Greek boys in particular would make such comments as: "He is stupid;" "He deserves what he gets because he is not nice like me. I would never have done what he did;" "He is a bad child, that's why God must have sent the dog to bite him and punish him." Such comments can be interpreted as the subjects' tendency to remove themselves from the emotional experience, and instead to project into others their own unacceptable impulses and feelings. The responses of the Greek children also indicate a dependency on authority figures, particularly the mother, mixed with a fear of punishment, as revealed by such comments as: "He is crying for his mommy; but his mommy must have been mean to let him go there and get lost;" "He is going to get a beating;" or, "He should go and tell the truth so the bad child will get the spanking and not him." Expressions of jealousy were also preva-

lent in the Greek children's responses, particularly the deprived ones, evidenced by such comments as, "I am glad he stole the toy. Now he will have a toy to play with too". The Greek children were verbose, often repeating the entire narrative presented with the slides, as if they had difficulty in detaching themselves from the concrete elements of the story and abstracting their feelings from the situations presented.

The lesser empathy of boys versus girls in Greece can be explained in terms of the differential treatment of the two sexes, particularly the close mother-son relationship and the relative absence and unavailability of the father figure in everyday transactions. Glueck and Glueck (1950, Biller (1970) and Hoffman (1971) have shown that for young boys such conditions inhibit internalization of values and moral development.

On the Greek island, this effect is heightened by the fact that the men on the island are usually away on ships during the formative years of the children's lives, with the result that boys on the island may have a sex-identity problem, as manifested by their being the only sub-group who had higher empathy for stimulus children of the opposite sex.

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TABLE 1

Empathy Mean Scores and Analysis of Variance Results

	Score	Number of Subjects	df	F	p
Location					
Athens	4.16	64			
Island	3.90	60	2,158	15,359	0.0001
America	6.61	46			
Subject Sex					
Male	4.12	85	1,158	8.695	0.004
Female	5.34	85			
Stimulus Sex					
Male	4.45	85	1,158	1.852	0.172
Female	5.01	85			
Location X Subject Sex					
America, male	6.65	23			
America, female	6.57	23			
Athens, male	3.19	32	2,158	1.967	0.141
Athens, female	5.13	32			
Island, male	3.17	30			
Island, female	4.63	30			
Subject Sex X Stimulus Sex					
Male, male	4.28	43			
Male, female	3.95	42	1,158	4.375	0.036
Female, female	6.05	43			
Female, male	4.62	42			

Location X Subject Sex X Stimulus Sex					
America, male, male	7.42	12			
America, male, female	5.82	11			
America, female, female	7.25	12			
America, female, male	5.82	11			
Athens, male, male	3.75	16			
Athens, male, female	2.63	16	2,158	0.996	0.627
Athens, female, female	5.69	16			
Athens, female, male	4.56	16			
Island, male, male	2.33	15			
Island, male, female	4.00	15			
Island, female, female	5.47	15			
Island, female, male	3.80	15			